AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

This listing of claims replaces all prior versions and listings of claims in the application:

1. (Currently Amended) Apparatus for protecting a composite-body aircraft against damage from lightning strikes, comprising:

an aircraft body including a plurality of composite panels; ~~and~~

a plurality of electrically conductive splice plates configured to join ~~one of the plurality of~~ adjacent ones of the composite panels to ~~an adjacent other one of the plurality of composite panels~~ one another at ~~their~~ respective edges of the adjacent composite panels[[,]];

a plurality of electrically conductive straps; and

a plurality of electrically conductive fasteners;

wherein the straps and the fasteners mechanically and electrically couple adjacent ends of the splice plates to one another such that the ~~plurality of electrically conductive~~ splice plates ~~directly electrically coupled to adjacent ones of the plurality of electrically conductive splice plates to~~ form a continuous, electrically conductive grid disposed on the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

2. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the continuous, electrically conductive grid extends to the outermost lateral periphery of the aircraft body.

3. (Canceled)

4. (Canceled)

5. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the electrically conductive splice plates comprise titanium.

6. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the aircraft body comprises a blended-wing-body ("BWB") aircraft.

7. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the plurality of composite panels comprise graphite fibers.

8. (Previously Presented) The apparatus of Claim 1, wherein the aircraft body includes an electrical system, and wherein the electrically conductive grid comprises a ground return path of the electrical system.

9. (Currently Amended) A method for protecting a composite-body aircraft against damage from lightning strikes, comprising:

~~providing an aircraft body including a plurality of~~ coupling adjacent composite panels on an aircraft body to one another at respective edges of the adjacent composite panels~~; coupling each one of the plurality of composite panels to an adjacent other one of the plurality of composite panels~~ using ~~a plurality of~~ electrically conductive splice plates, electrically conductive straps and electrically conductive fasteners; ~~and~~

~~directly electrically coupling adjacent ends of the conductive splice plates to each other to form a continuous, electrically conductive grid on the exterior surface of the aircraft body~~

wherein the straps and the fasteners mechanically and electrically couple adjacent ends of the splice plates to one another such that the splice plates form a continuous, electrically conductive grid disposed on the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

10. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the continuous, electrically conductive grid extends to the outermost lateral periphery of the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

11. (Canceled)

12. (Canceled)

13. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the electrically conductive splice plates comprise titanium.

14. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the aircraft body comprises a blended-wing-body ("BWB") aircraft.

15. (Currently Amended) The method of Claim 9, wherein the ~~plurality of~~ composite panels comprise graphite fibers.

16. (Previously Presented) The method of Claim 9, wherein the aircraft body includes an electrical system, and wherein the electrically conductive grid comprises a ground return path of the electrical system.

17. (Canceled)

18. (New) An aircraft body, comprising:

a plurality of composite panels, adjacent pairs of the composite panels defining a groove therebetween; and

a plurality of electrically conductive splice plates, each splice plate disposed within one of the grooves;

wherein adjacent ends of the splice plates are mechanically and electrically coupled to one another such that the splice plates form a continuous, electrically conductive grid disposed on the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

19. (New) The aircraft body of Claim 18, further comprising a plurality of electrically conductive straps and a plurality of electrically conductive fasteners, wherein the straps and the fasteners mechanically and electrically couple the adjacent ends of the splice plates to one another.

20. (New) The aircraft body of Claim 18, wherein the electrically conductive splice plates comprise titanium.

21. (New) The aircraft body of Claim 18, wherein the aircraft body comprises a blended-wing-body ("BWB") aircraft.

22. (New) The aircraft body of Claim 18, wherein the continuous, electrically conductive grid extends to the outermost lateral periphery of the exterior surface of the aircraft body.

23. (New) The aircraft body of Claim 18, wherein the composite panels comprise graphite fibers.

24. (New) The aircraft body of Claim 18, wherein the aircraft body includes an electrical system, and the electrically conductive grid comprises a ground return path of the electrical system.